

A FOOL AND HIS MONEY

Drawing by Arthur I. Keller

BY GEORGE BARR McCUTCHEON

CHAPTER X. (Continued)

I Agree to Meet the Enemy

THE Countess came for dinner with us on Sunday, and made the dressing for my alligator pear salad. We were besieged by the usual crowd of Sunday sightseers, who came clamoring at our stanch, reinforced gates, and anathematized me soundly for refusing admission. One bourgeois party of fifteen refused to leave the plaza until their return fares on the ferry barge were paid, stoutly maintaining that they had come over in good faith and wouldn't leave until I had reimbursed them to the extent of twenty-five cents apiece, ferry fare. I sent Britton out with the money. He returned with the rather disquieting news that he had recognized two of Pless's secret agents in the mob.

"I wonder if he suspects I am here?" said the Countess, paling perceptibly when I mentioned the presence of the two men.

"It doesn't matter," said I. "He can't get into the castle while the gates are locked, and—by Jove! I intend to keep them locked."

Nevertheless, I did not sleep well that night. The presence of the two detectives outside my gates was not to be taken too lightly. Unquestionably they had got wind of something that aroused suspicion in their minds. I confidently expected them to reappear in the morning, perhaps disguised as workmen. Nor were my fears wholly unjustified.

Shortly after nine o'clock a sly-faced man in overalls accosted me in the hall.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Smart," he said in fairly good English, "may I have a word with you? I have a message from Mr. Pless. I am an agent of the Secret Service. Yesterday I failed to gain admission as a visitor; today I come as a laborer. We work in a mysterious way, Sir."

"Is it necessary for Mr. Pless to resort to a subterfuge of this character in order to get a message to me?" I demanded indignantly.

"It was not necessary yesterday; but it is today," said he. He leaned closer and lowered his voice. "Our every movement is being watched by the Countess's detectives. We are obliged to resort to trickery to throw them off the scent. Mr. Pless has read what you had to say in the newspapers, and he is too grateful, Sir, to subject you to unnecessary annoyance at the hands of her agents. Your friendship is sacred to him. He realizes that it means a great deal to have the support of one so powerful with the United States government. If we are to work together, Mr. Smart, in bringing this woman to justice, it must be managed with extreme skill, or her family may—"

"What is this you are saying?" I broke in, scarcely able to believe my ears.

"I speak English so badly," he apologized. "Perhaps I should do no more than to give you his message. He would like you to meet him secretly tonight at the Rempf Hotel across the river. It is most important that you should do so, and that you should exercise great caution. I am to get your reply and take it back to him."

For an instant I was fairly stupefied. Then I experienced a feeling of relief so vast that he must have seen the gleam of triumph in my eyes. The trick was mine, after all. "You may tell Mr. Pless that I will be there at nine," said I.

The agent departed.

WHEN he was safely out of the room, I explained the situation to Poopendyke, and then made my way through the secret panels to the Countess's rooms.

"Then you don't intend to send out the statements?" she cried in disappointment. "You are going to let everyone think you are his friend and not mine?"

I stood over her, trying my best to scowl. "You know better than that. You know I—I am as loyal as—as can be. Hang it all!" I burst out impulsively, "do you suppose for a minute that I want to hand you over to that infernal rascal, now that I've come to—that is to say, now that we're such ripping good friends?"

She looked up at me very pathetically at first. Then her expression changed swiftly to one of wonder and the most penetrating inquiry. Slowly a flush crept into her cheeks and her eyes wavered. "I—I think I can trust you to—to do the right thing by me," she said, descending to a banality in her confusion.

I held out my hand. She laid hers in it rather timidly, almost as if afraid of me.

"I will not fail you!" said I.

For some unaccountable reason she rose hastily from the chair and walked to the window. A similar reason, no doubt, held me rooted rather safely to the spot on which I stood. I have a vague recollection of feeling dizzy and rather short of breath. My heart was acting queerly.

"Why do you suppose he wants to see you?" she asked after a moment, turning toward me again. She was as calm as a summer breeze. All trace of nervousness had left her.

"I can't even supply a guess."

"You must be very, very tactful," she said uneasily.

"He is very cunning. And you must come to see me tonight after you return from town. I won't sleep until I've heard everything. You will be hungry too when you come in. I shall have a nice supper ready for you."

CHAPTER XI. I Am Invited to Lend Money

I FOUND Pless at the Rempf Hotel at nine o'clock. The manager directed me to the top floor.

Pless welcomed me with a great deal of warmth. He called me "dear old fellow," and shook hands with me with more heartiness than I had thought him capable of expressing. His dark, handsome face was aglow with pleasure. A smallish old gentleman was with him. I was informed that he was Schymansky, one of the greatest lawyers and advocates in Vienna, and Pless's personal adviser in the "unfortunate controversy."

I accepted a cigar.

"So you knew who I was all the time I was at Schloss Rothhoefen!" said Pless, smiling amiably. "I was trying to maintain my incognito so that you might not be distressed, Mr. Smart, by having in your home such a notorious character as I am supposed to be. I confess it was rather shabby in me; but I hold your excellent friends responsible for the trick."

"It is rather difficult to keep a secret with women about," said I evasively.

"But never difficult to construct one," said Schymansky, winking rather too broadly.

"By the way," said I, "I have had no word from our mutual friends. Have you seen them?"

Pless stiffened. His face grew perceptibly older. "I regret to inform you, Mr. Smart, that our relations are not quite so friendly as they once were. I have reason to suspect that Smith has been working against me for the last two or three days; to such an extent, I may say, that the Ambassador now declines to advise your government to grant us certain privileges we had hoped to secure without trouble. In short, we have just heard that he will not ask the United States to consider anything in the shape of an extradition if the Countess is apprehended in her own country. Up to yesterday we felt confident that he would advise your State Department to turn the child over to our representatives in case she was to be found there. There has been underhand work going on, and Smith is at the bottom of it. He wantonly insulted me the day we left Rothhoefen. I have challenged him; but he—he committed the most diabolical breach of etiquette by threatening to kick my friend the Baron out of his rooms when he waited upon him yesterday morning!"

With difficulty I restrained a desire to shout the single word "Good!" I was proud of Billy Smith. Controlling my exultation, I merely said, "Perfectly diabolical! Perfectly!"

I HAVE no doubt, however, that should our Minister make a formal demand upon your Secretary of State the cause of justice would be sustained. It is a clear case of abduction, as you so forcibly declare in the interviews, Mr. Smart. I cannot adequately express my gratification for the stand you have taken. Will you be offended if I add that it was rather unexpected? I had the feeling that you were against me, that you did not like me."

I smiled deprecatingly. "As I seldom read the newspapers, I am not quite sure that they have done justice to my real feelings in the matter."

The lawyer, sitting directly opposite to me, was watching my face intently. "They quoted you rather freely, Sir," said he. "The Count is to be congratulated upon having the good will of so distinguished a gentleman as John Bellamy Smart. It will carry great weight, believe me."

"Oh, you will find to your sorrow that I cut a very small figure in national politics," said I. "Pray do not deceive yourselves."

"Am I to assume," said Pless, "that the newspapers were correct in stating that you meant to support my cause with—to the full extent of your powers?"

"It depends on circumstances, Mr. Pless."

"Circumstances?" He eyed me rather coldly, as if to say, "What right have you to suggest circumstances?" "Perhaps I should have said that it depends somewhat on what my powers represent."

He crossed his slender legs comfortably and looked at me with a queer little tilt of his left eyebrow, but with an unsmiling visage. He was too cocksure of himself to grant me even so much as an ingratiating smile. Was I not a glory-seeking American and he one of the glorious? It would be doing me a favor to let me help him!

"I trust you will understand, Mr. Smart, that I do not ask a favor of you, but rather put myself under a certain obligation for the time being. You have become a landowner in this country, and as such you should ally yourself with the representative people of our land. It is not an easy matter for a foreigner to plant himself in our midst, so to speak, and expect to thrive on limited favors. I can be of assistance to you. My position, as you doubtless know, is rather a superior one in the Capital. An unfortunate marriage has not lessened the power that I possess as a birthright, nor the esteem in which I am held throughout Europe. The disgraceful methods employed by my former wife in securing a divorce are well known to you, I take it,

and I am gratified to observe that you frown upon them. I suppose you know the whole story?"

"I think I do," said I quietly.

"Then you are aware that her father has defaulted under the terms of an antenuptial agreement. There is still due me, under the contract, a round million of your exceedingly useful dollars. Of course he will have to pay this money before his daughter may even hope to gain from me the right to share the custody of our little girl, who loves me devotedly. When the debt is fully liquidated I may consent to an arrangement by which she shall have the child part of the time at least."

"It seems to me that she has the upper hand of you at present, however," I said. "She may be in America by this time."

"I think not," said he. "Every steamship has been watched for days, and we are quite positive she has not sailed. There is the possibility, however, that she may have been taken by motor to some out-of-the-way place where she will await the chance to slip away by means of a specially chartered ship. It is this very thing we are seeking to prevent. I do not hesitate to admit that if she once gets the child to New York we may expect serious difficulty in obtaining our rights. I humbly confess that I have not the means to fight her in a land where her father's millions count for so much. I am a poor man. My estates are heavily involved through litigation started by my forebears. You understand my position?" He said it with a rather pathetic twist of his lips.

I UNDERSTOOD that you received a million in cash at the time of the wedding," said I. "What has become of all that?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Can you expect me to indulge an extravagant wife, who seeks to become a social queen, and still save anything out of a paltry million?"

"Oh, I see. This is a new phase of the matter that hasn't been revealed to me. It was she who spent it?"

"After a fashion, yes," said he, without a spark of shame. "The château was in rather a dilapidated condition, and she insisted on its restoration. It was also necessary to spend a great deal of money in the effort to secure for herself a certain position in society. My own position was not sufficient for her. She wanted to improve upon it, I might say. We entertained a great deal, and lavishly. She was accustomed to gratifying every taste and whim that money could purchase. Naturally it was not long before we were hard pressed for funds. I went to New York a year ago and put the matter clearly before her father. He met me with another proposition that rather disgusted me. I am a man who believes in fair dealing. If I have an obligation, I meet it. Her father revoked his original plan and suggested an alternative. He proposed to put the million in trust for his granddaughter, our Rosemary,—a name, Sir, that I abominate, which was given to her after my wife had sulked for weeks,—the interest to be paid to his daughter until the child reached the age of twenty-one. Of course I could not accept such an arrangement. It—"

"Acting on my advice; for I was at the interview—"

"Never mind, Schymansky," broke in the Count petulantly. "Will you be good enough to leave the room for awhile? I think Mr. Smart and I can safely manage a friendly compact without your assistance. Eh, Mr. Smart?"

Schymansky left the room without so much as a glance at me. He struck me as a man who knew his place better than any menial I've ever seen.

"Rather rough way to handle a lawyer, it strikes me," said I. "Isn't he any good?"

"He is as good as the best of them," said the Count, lighting his fourth or fifth cigarette. "I have no patience with the way they muddle matters by always talking law, law, law! If it were left to me, I should dismiss the whole lot of them and depend entirely upon my commonsense. Now, here is the situation in a word. It is impossible for me to prosecute the search for my child without financial assistance from outside sources. My funds are practically exhausted, and the banks refuse to extend my credit. You have publicly declared yourself to be my friend and well wisher. I have asked you to come here tonight, Mr. Smart, to put you to the real test, so to speak. I want one hundred thousand dollars for six months."

WHILE I was prepared in a sense for the request, the brazenness with which he put it up to me took my breath away. "Really, Mr. Pless," I mumbled in direct contrast to his sang froid, "you—you surprise me!"

He laughed quietly, almost reassuringly. "I hope you do not think that I expect you to produce so much ready money tonight, Mr. Smart. Oh, no! Any time within the next few days will be satisfactory. Take your time, Sir. I appreciate that it requires time to arrange for the—"

I held up my hand with a rather lofty air. "Was it one hundred and fifty thousand that you mentioned, or—"

"That was the amount," said he, a sudden glitter in his eyes.

I studied the ceiling with a calculating squint, as if trying to approximate my balance in bank. He watched